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ABSTRACT

The decline in student enrollment in high school and college language programs is seen to be linked directly with student attitudes toward their classroom experiences in foreign language programs. Suggestions concerning teaching techniques for improving student motivation are discussed, and methods which involve the student personally as an active participant in the teaching and learning process are recommended. The rationale and objectives of peer group teaching in the classroom are considered and cited as being particularly effective in involving the student in the language program. (RL)

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CAN AMERICAN STUDENTS GET EXCITED ABOUT FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDY?

Is it important that students be excited about the language they are studying? Evidently, I believe it is or else I would not be attempting to speak about such an issue. To those who would say that this is unimportant, I would answer that nothing is learned without motivation. But there are different types of motivation.

There is, for example, the motivation for a good grade. The mark-conscious student will study in order to get an A on a test. But these same teacher-made tests often do not test a student's skill in understanding and speaking the language and are actually negative motivation for students whose chief interest is to use the language in communication situations.

Our foreign-language curriculum has for too long constituted a closed system which is geared only to the college-bound student and in which only the above-average succeed. Think of the drop-out rate by the time students get to third and fourth year of high-school language study. In the words of one secondary principal with whom I recently worked on a North Central Accrediting team, "in no area does the teacher's personality and enthusiasm have as much effect on enrollment as in Foreign Languages." As teachers, we have not been creative enough to stop the trend towards fourth-year classes which contain only five students. One of the students here today from Northern Iowa was refused permission, as a high-school senior, to take fourth-year French because she had an 84 average and an 85 was required for entrance into French four!

There are other types of motivation than the motivation of a grade. According to Wallace Lambert, the language learner's ethnocentric tendencies, his attitudes towards the other culture and his orientation towards language learning are the key to his motivation to learn and ultimately his success or failure in mastering the foreign language. Lambert speaks of two types of orientation which motivate students to succeed in a foreign language: first when a student hopes to get ahead, to get a job, to succeed materially through the foreign language; second, when the student actually desires to know more about and to become more like the members of the larget culture.

We Americans are known as pragmatists, and it therefore behooves us to ask the question "what good is French going to do me?" by which we mean "how can I use this to earn a better living someday?" This is a relevant question of our language majors, especially at a time when less and less teaching positions are available. We can encourage some students to major in a foreign language by making them aware of new areas in which they can use the foreign language in a career. One of the results of the bilingual institute being established at UNI by Doctor Nodarse is that teaching majors from the sciences, the social sciences, the arts and the humanities will prepare themselves in a foreign-language in order to become teachers in bilingual education. This is a valuable service, but it is only part of the motivational picture since it concerns only those who hope to make a career out of the foreign language.

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There are many more students in our classes who will not major in a foreign-language than those who will. Our number one job as a foreign-language teacher is to excite our students, majors and non-majors alike, to want to know more about and to become more like the members of the target culture. I choose the word become on purpose, for I believe with Lambert that the successful learner of a second language has to identify with members of the language to some degree to want to take on certain aspects of their behavior, primarily their language.

There are roadblocks for the student whose ethnocentric tendencies may be so strong so as to make him look down on members of other cultures as inferior. If you think this is not frequent, just remember the large number of false generalizations made by the average american about people from other countries: for example, Frenchmen are effeminate. How many boys avoid French because they feel it is a sissy language?

But these attitudes can quickly disappear, provided that the teacher gives the students a taste of language learning as an interesting and enjoyable process of self-discovery by using the foreign language in more and more involved communication situations.

For the average American student, getting excited about foreign-language study comes from using the language to communicate with others about things of interest to him.

Probably the greatest motivation to study comes from really getting to use the code: to speak and understand French, Spanish, German, Russian, etc. with other students. This gives encouragement and even a sense of pride to the learner, since not everyone in school is capable of communicating in this language. It's his code, his accomplishment, and, at least at the start, he can readily see his progress.

This idea seems simple enough, but in reality it is the most challenging part of our career. How easy it is to lose sight of the only intrinsic reason for studying a foreign language: to use it for communication. Whether we employ a cognitive-code or a habit-formation approach to foreign-language teaching, if all we do is discuss grammar or carry on structure drills, we are accomplishing nothing. Yet so many students are given the opportunity only to recall grammar rules or to parrot structural drills. We can not afford to consider mastery of rules or of drills to be the ultimate behavior which learners are to show.

If we are to get students excited about foreign-language study, then we have to be creative in the best sense of this word. We should create an atmosphere in which students get to interact with others and to share feelings and ideas in the foreign language. Creativity is what begins when stimulus-response stops. To give students an opportunity for creativity requires a teacher who is something of an extrovert and who is really interested in students as people and not just in students as learners. Perhaps an analogy would help. As a boy, I often dug for clams on the sandbars near Milford, Connecticut. Having found a clam,

I would try to get it open. Have you ever tried to do this? You need a stick or a rock and invariably, when you succeed in opening the clam you also destroy it, for the shell breaks apart. Seagulls are well aware of this. They pick up the clam and fly over a rocky coast, drop the clam, break the shell and then eat the clam. There's one way, however, to get the clam to open the shell for you: put it in warm water and it will open up all by itself!

I feel that this analogy is appropriate for the type of foreign-language teaching which should go on if students are to look forward to using the language. We've got to be the warm water which will encourage our students to open up. And please don't say I'm all wet.

To succeed, the classroom situation has to be alive, has to be different from the one normally associated with schools. This requires personal involvement and means that the creative teacher is constantly looking for ways to engage students in conversation at their level. It means that first priority is given to interaction in the foreign language. Let's take, for example, the use of structural exercises. Structural exercises are not a tool to develope speech habits but contain no motivational value in themselves. Few things, in fact, are more boring for the student than running through five or six structural exercises one after another, automatically following the teacher through the pattern drills, and often not understanding what he is saying. But structural exercises can be a wonderful tool to help students use the correct structures of the language with the right accent and intonation. It all depends on the teacher's creativity, on his desire to give students opportunities for self-expression. If the teacher is conscious of creating personal involvement on the part of the student, he will make sure that the exercises are relevant to the student--that they are not too long and that they are based on some mistake made in conversation. He will make sure that the student understands what is being drilled and will break into the drill often to engage the student in seconds of conversation.

Let's say that the drill involves the relative pronoun who, and that in this drill we are combining two sentences together:

A man is coming: He's my father:::the man who's coming is my father.

A man is coming: He's my uncle:::the man who's coming is my uncle.

A teacher who is anxious to involve students in meaingful communication through the foreign language will break into this drill as soon as it is going well and ask questions such as--"Is he really coming?", "What's his name?", "Where does he live?"--questions which force the students to choose an answer rather than give an automatic response. We personally involve the student by turning the drill into a small conversation. It ceases to be a drill during the conversation and requires a good deal of teacher patience, enthusiasm and creativity to keep it going. Politzer has proven that the ability to get away from the textbook, from the rigid lesson or exercise, is one of the keys to successful foreign language teaching.

This type of teaching can go on only when the teacher is genuinely interested in the students as people, only when the teacher himself enjoys using the language and enjoys involving students in its use. I am not saying that it's easy to learn to use a foreign language. Anyone who tells students that it is easy is deluding them. Years of work are required in normal circumstances before anything approaching real fluency can be attained. But, if we want students to commit themselves to that work, then we have to give them opportunities to express themselves right from the start. To be able to excite students, teachers are needed who are able to get excited themselves about language teaching. Are our graduate programs producing teachers like this? I do not think so. I agree with the words of Mills F. Edgerton, Jr.: "There is nothing more deadly dull and discouraging than a language class taught by a man or woman who clearly considers the whole business beneath his dignity." And yet the traditional doctorate program, far from guaranteeing an interest and an ability to teach, has produced people who scorn the beginning and intermediate levels of language teaching, people who feel that real language teaching is beneath them and that teaching literature is what it's all about.

Without the teacher showing interest and enthusiasm there can be little student motivation. No approaches, methods or techniques can overcome this fact. But, there have been recent developments in methods and techniques which can greatly increase the effectiveness of the teacher who is concerned about personal involvement on the part of his students. The use of groups, both in class and out of class, and the implementation of individualized instruction are both of considerable help to the teacher who wants to get students personally involved. At UNI very effective use of groups on the beginning level has been made. Right from the start students are given the opportunity to express themselves in small, out-of-class groups led by advanced students and to relate the material studied to their own lives through questions and answers concerning their families, their occupations, their likes and dislikes.

We have also experimented, on the intermediate level, with in-class peer groups. During part of the period the teacher conducts full-class activities, presenting the next reading assignment, or explaining items of great difficulty. Then, during another part of the class, students divide into groups of two, three, or four and engage in conversation by asking and answering personalized questions to each other. Model questions are prepared by the teacher, who has taken the vocabulary and structure from previously read material and has put a few appropriate questions on a transparency or on sheets of paper. I believe with Renée S. Disick that "the apparent disadvantage of the teacher's being unable to hear each student and correct each error is more than outweighed by the benefit of involving more students in the learning activity and developing their confidence and foreign language fluency in the relaxed atmosphere of a small group." During the last five minutes of class, the teacher, who will have taken a few notes while visiting the small groups, can call the class back together again to correct some mistakes or give the foreign-language equivalents of a few expressions which students wished to use in their conversation.

Individualized instruction as well can be very effective in personalizing the education process, especially with respect to the skills of writing and listening comprehension. We are now employing a completely individualized approach in our lower-division, intermediate French composition classes. This consists of study and analysis, written observations or exercises, dictation, guided composition, and a mini-quiz. I would be happy to explain this system to all who are interested. Essentially, it allows students to set their own pace in acquiring the skills of listening comprehension, spelling and composition. This, we feel, is especially important at the intermediate level, since students at that level come from many types of language preparation and can not all be treated in the same lock step fashion.

Those of you who are interested in individualizing would do well to consult Rosemary Van Dyke and Water Chatfield, who conduct a quite successful summer program in teacher training at Drake University.

The essential ingredient in foreign-language study should be to make learning a personal commitment. Creative teachers are needed who are able to go beyond the grammar rules and the exercises to find situations in which students engage in foreign-language communication. This is the only intrinsic goal of foreigr language teaching and this is the way to really excite our students about foreign-language study.

In closing, I would remind you that I have purposefully left out any mention of foreign study programs or summer language institutes. I do not mean to slight any of these programs, which put students in the foreign country, especially if they bring them into active language use with native speakers. This, indeed, is the crowning experience in a student's foreign-language study and a potentially giant source of motivation. I have rather limited my remarks to the American high-school and college setting. I believe that students can be excited about foreign-language studying right in our own classrooms, provided that we constantly create opportunities through which personalized communication takes place.

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